

Housing and Urban Design

The first social housing hui held in September 2001 highlighted numerous housing and urban design issues, which participants felt were important to consider in the development of a social housing strategy. Topics which concentrated on these issues were:

- designing and building for low energy use;
- mixed use development;
- promoting and maintaining social diversity in housing within intensified growth;
- healthier housing through insulation retrofitting;
- healthy interior environments;
- integrated development variety – avoiding housing ghettos in inner city development;
- taking a lead in the housing industry to facilitate affordable design and building solutions; and
- universal designs.

Make-up of the Housing and Urban Design Working Party

The working party was chaired by Morten Gjerde, an architect and lecturer at Victoria University. Amongst the working party there were representatives of the Pacific community, the research community, building professionals and representatives from the Ministry of Transport, the Energy Efficiency and Conservation Authority and the Building Research Association of New Zealand.

Principles were developed in order to guide the development of a Housing and Urban Design Strategy.

Statement Of Principle

Good housing and urban design is not just concerned with sheltering people but the wider context in which they live, in particular the interconnections between people (human relationships) and between people and places (environment).

Principles

- Sound research underpins the realisation of the Statement of Principle
- The evaluation and maintenance of sustainable communities demands equal consideration of economic, environmental, social and cultural factors
- Housing and urban design meets present needs and can accommodate future needs.
- HNZC creates opportunities that will enable local communities to recognise existing capacities and to develop new ones
- Infrastructure is provided to enable the community to thrive
- Housing and urban design is based on the establishment and maintenance of safe communities
- HNZC influences and educates all stakeholders by demonstrating best practice urban design principles.
- Communities fully participate in decision-making.

Issues Raised By Participants

In general, participants raise the question who defines quality, or good, housing and urban design. They felt that quality was ultimately defined by people living in homes they wanted to live in.

Architectural Design

With respect to the architectural design of individual houses, participants felt that the designs should ensure that the home is flexible and adaptable to take into account the dynamic and diverse needs of its current occupants and possible future occupants. Designs needed to be cultural appropriate and ensure that the occupants are afforded a certain amount of privacy from neighbouring homes. Houses shouldn't look alike – they need identity and individualism. “HNZC houses can be identifiable – but identifiable as quality houses” (working party participant).

Also cheap building materials can be used the design of the house but must be appropriate and aesthetically pleasing. Design tools such as zero lot lines are also useful in order to make the most of urban space.

In the quest for good design for social housing, John Byrne a Professor in Urban Design and Architecture suggests a tax subsidy to the architectural firms involved in work on low income housing schemes.

Designs must also take into account security considerations.

Environmental Design

The relationship between the physical environment and the people that inhabit that environment was important to participants. Amenities should be within easy access which may mean not accepting cheap land, on the urban fringe, on which to build social housing. Again, participants stressed the need for diversity of use and aesthetic of social housing. Simple things like colour can improve the landscape in which houses sit. Design, according to participants is particularly important in higher density building.

Well designed and well insulated homes provide, not just greater comfort and/or lower heating costs, but also a healthier environment for the occupants. This is particularly important for the occupants of HNZC homes who are often the very young and the elderly, and for these people a healthy (dry and warm) home is particularly important.

Participants also stressed the need to take into account flood plains, climatic change, future climatic risk, overheating, in both new and old developments as weather extremes, in an absolute sense, are going to get greater.

Transport

Decisions on the location of social housing need to take into account the occupants ability to access transport, including both public and private transport. As previously mentioned, people need to be able to access amenities such as schools, shops and health services.

Community Development

Participants felt that good housing and urban design reflects the wants and needs of neighbourhoods and the communities within those neighbourhoods. Participants stressed that design should not only reflect the requirements of the geographical community but also the religious, cultural and recreational layers of communities. Cultural groups may desire to live in a village or papakainga setting, whilst older people may like to live within walking distance to provide each other with support. However, in this regard, development must be careful to avoid segregation.

Communities are created when people have a vested interest in maintaining both their physical community and relationships which foster those communities. In order to help promote this interest and pride in community, participants suggested that HNZA could look for opportunities to provide local employment for example using local people to maintain houses, gardens and grounds in shared spaces and providing apprenticeships on building sites.

They asserted that stability was very important in creating a sense of community. In order to foster stability, participants asserted the need for ‘mixed’ neighbourhoods, that is neighbourhoods of diverse kinds of housing (for example boarding houses, community care for mental health consumers and one – five bedroom homes); a range of age groups from youth to kaumatua; and people in a range of income groups and occupations. For instance if there are people home during the day in a community this can serve to discourage crime. Those in higher income brackets can contribute to the local community’s economy.

In addition urban design needs to balance the need for privacy, with allowing people opportunities to connect with one another. When people have no choice as to where they live, they are more vulnerable and therefore require enough of their own space to feel comfortable in order to connect with others in their communities. Examples of current social housing and urban design successes include Rowena Crescent in Glen Innes – Auckland and the three star blocks in Upper Hutt.

HNZA Service Provision

Participants felt that HNZA could have a facilitation role beyond just providing housing. Because HNZA pays such a large rates bill, HNZA could advocate on behalf of communities in order to obtain services and amenities that those communities desire from the local council. Because of its purchasing power, HNZA could also form partnerships with industry and companies which provide products such as plants and amenities such as energy and telecommunications, to lower costs for tenants.

With respect to HNZA houses, participants asserted that it was much more important to concentrate on bettering HNZA’s 60,000 existing houses rather than new acquisitions.

Affordability

Affordable housing was a priority for participants. The need for low-cost HNZA housing has to be balanced against the need to ensure tenants can afford to live in the. For instance, houses which are well located, that is close to schools, health services, employment and transport services may be more affordable for social housing tenants. A better social cost benefit analysis is required in order to examine this more closely. Also, triple bottom line reporting is required in order to assess the environmental, social and fiscal impacts of current and future social housing provision.

Research / Analysis

Participants felt that research needed to be undertaken looking at case studies of good urban design in New Zealand in order to effect good social housing design. We need to look at why some urban landscapes work and some don't.

Other Documents to Consider

Participants noted the following documents to consider in the development of a Social Housing Strategy.

1. United Nations. *Kyoto Protocol to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change*. (1997). United Nations.
2. Ministry of Transport. (2002) National Transport Strategy (to be released).
3. Ministry for the Environment. (2002). *People, Places, Spaces: a design guide for urban New Zealand*. Ministry for the Environment: Wellington.
4. Ministry of Transport, Ministry for the Environment, EECA. (in press) *Toward More Sustainable Settlements Project*.
5. Standards New Zealand. (2001). *New Zealand Handbook 44:2001. Subdivision for People and the Environment*. Standards New Zealand: Wellington, New Zealand. www.standards.co.nz
4. BRANZ. (1997). *Green Home Scheme*. BRANZ: Wellington.
5. Waitakere City Council. (1998). *Sustainable Home Guidelines*. Waitakere City Council: Auckland.
6. Department of Housing. (2000). *Residential Design Manual – Smart Housing*. Queensland Government.

In conclusion, participants stressed that there is no one solution, but good housing and urban design requires a process in order that it can be individualised. “Architecture is available anywhere if the attitude is right” (working party participant). Further discussion is required in order to develop an action plan to guide further work.